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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic paradigm was used to collect the needed information on effective Right to Read program planning and staff training in several New York school districts. The paradigm encompassed six steps: determining program goals and objectives, completing needs assessment, determining planning strategies, writing and accepting the plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating outcomes. These six areas were addressed at a regional meeting, where data were collected from participants and presenters by using questionnaires and interviews. A second major measurement area focused on monitoring participating districts' efforts to organize and practice the skills gained at the regional session. Common elements reflected in this evaluation scheme were identifying the adequacy of programs, planning emphasis and progress, identifying problems and assets, and determining program impact. The results of combining these two inquiries led to five generalizations about how the districts could maintain or improve their Right to Read programs. The main benefits from using ethnographic inquiry were the redirecting of resources and funds to problem areas, reviving staff enthusiasm, and increasing district capabilities for achieving quality reading instruction. In general, ethnographic analysis provided helpful information that statistical treatments or basic surveys alone could not have provided. (RL)

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Evaluating the Effectiveness of Training and Planning Programs

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Evaluating the Effectiveness of Training and Planning Programs

The Right to Read Program began amid high expectations and missionary zeal. With a goal of eliminating illiteracy by 1980, the federal Right to Read office offers State agencies an opportunity to continue staff development for district personnel on an expanded scale. State agencies were encouraged to organize leadership training programs in ways which best suited their needs. As for participating districts, they were expected to develop and implement a comprehensive reading plan as the outcome of their participation in the Right to Read program. Near the end of each grant period, State agencies evaluated their activities and their impact. However, with such a large scope and the multi-faceted nature of statewide activities, methological and resource problems were immediately apparent.

For evaluation of this nature, the question is "What can be done to measure the impact and success of planning efforts and staff development?" Obviously a need exists for an evaluation paradigm which has utility for both state and district programs to address this question.

To achieve staff improvements, administrators focus on three basic elements - leadership training, planning processes and district staff development. When considering such activities, their plans necessarily incorporate four steps: identifying and preparing leaders, planning for change, implementing change and stabilizing the change. These steps may then be recast into questions for the purpose of directing the evaluation of how effective the program has been:

1) Has the leadership phase been successful in producing knowledgeable leaders?
2) Has the planning phase produced a workable plan?
3) What processes were employed and what expectations were generated in the planning phase?
4) What impact is apparent within the district?

Research Paradigm

What evaluation tools are available to quantify such questions? Of equal importance, how may we generate an evaluation which gives direction for future planning.[1] Planning and staff training have not generally received rigorous review to evaluate their effectiveness.[2, 3]

The evaluation of both planning efforts and staff development tend to look at basic level information such as numbers involved, topics covered and personal reactions to presenters. Data of this type avoid the issue of program impact and implementation, as well as avoiding a concern for changes in participants' perceptions, skills and knowledge over a period of time. The product and process evaluation should be directly linked if effective measurement is to be achieved.[4]

The concept of educational evaluation has moved from informal, non-rigorous studies to highly sophisticated, statistical treatment of data. But the need for an additional branch of productive evaluation, termed ethnographic studies, has recently been noted.[5, 6] Such efforts couple interviews, observations and other measures into an evaluation scheme recognizing differences in learning, needs

and objectives. This paper describes efforts to evaluate district reaction to the training and their felt needs using such a balanced study approach.[7]

Leadership development programs and planning programs may be monitored from the aspects of their focus, emphasis, impact and resulting change. The Right to Read training component has a general objective to prepare district personnel to accomplish comprehensive planning in reading. As such, the planning process encompassed six steps:

1) determining program goals and objectives;
2) completing needs assessment;
3) determining planning strategies;
4) writing and accepting plan;
5) implementing plan; and
6) evaluating outcomes.

Regional Leadership Training

These six areas were addressed at a regional meeting during an academic year, 1975-76. Data were collected from the participants and the presenters (organizers) in both a formal, questionnaire format and an informal, interview format. The interviews and observations (monitoring) of individual sessions were conducted by an evaluation team composed of university staff and students.

The evaluation instrument paralleled the training sessions' content. Twenty items represented sub-divisions in the six-step procedure of the planning process. Participants responded using a five-point, self-analysis scale (from little to considerable) in three essential areas: district's planning status; district's need for information; and expected (or observed) emphasis in sessions. A comparison of pre-workshop and post-workshop data demonstrated possible changes in perceived needs, status and desired emphasis. Both participants and presenters were encouraged to develop an awareness of potential district needs for planning.

The interview technique provided an opportunity to collect data of a type which was not reflected in the questionnaire format.

An evaluation team member discussed with district representatives their reactions to sessions, their need for additional assistance and the use of the six planning steps at the district level. Interviewing presenters enabled the program to build in a self-analysis system for the workshop leaders and to emphasize the application of planning techniques to district needs since the same presenters would be used for on-site technical assistance once the training phase was completed.

District Planning

The second major measurement area was the district's effort to organize and plan; in essence, to put into practice the skills gain at the regional sessions. Each of the 145 districts represented different sets of conditions, resources and personnel. Common elements reflected in the evaluation scheme are summarized by four concerns:

1) identifying the adequacy of program;
2) determining planning emphasis and progress;
3) identifying problems and assets during planning; and
4) determining program impact.

Committees within the local districts completed a rating scale which indicated the availability of information and satisfaction with program elements at various grade levels. A second aspect of the evaluation focused on a retrospective analysis; asking the question, "Would you continue the emphasis you had if you repeated the process?" The final judgement focused on degree of progress noticed at different grade levels for reading topics (such as grouping, testing, content reading).

Technical and evaluation assistance were provided throughout the planning cycle. As the selected district personnel developed the six-step Right to Read planning process, each recounted his/her problems, needs and understandings. Such analysis provided a feedback mechanism for them and a measuring device for technical assistance needs.

Results

The data gathered during the academic year lead to conclusions which could be generalized from the common elements in the training program and planning process. The findings from the evaluation may be summarized in four areas:

1. Regional leadership training requires:
   a) a clear district commitment to release personnel;
   b) an emphasis on practical applications of the step by step process;
   c) consultants who have district-level experience with the planning process; and
   d) an opportunity for an exchange of ideas by participants during the sessions.
2. Districts are successful with comprehensive planning when:
   a) people see a need for reviewing program;
   b) leader(s) have expertise in planning;
   c) administrative support is in writing, as well as presented orally; and
   d) some compensation is provided for directors such as time, recognition or finances.
3. Key elements for successful planning at the district level are:
   a) involvement of representative groups from the administration, staff, student and community groups;
   b) communication within committee, district and community;
   c) publicity indicating that a planning, evaluation effort is underway;
   d) committee establishes short and long-range goals; and
   e) committee leadership establishes realistic work assignments and deadlines.
4. Elements of the reading program most frequently identified by district personnel as needing improvement were:
   a) secondary (content area);
   b) comprehension in middle grades;
   c) evaluating reading progress;
   d) reading readiness - programs and testing; and
   e) staff training, especially at the secondary level.

5. Weaknesses observed during district implementation process were:

   a) failure of district to commit itself to the level required to accomplish this task;

   b) failure to give planning committee time and authority to accomplish goals;

   c) difficulty in obtaining outside consultants capable of providing technical assistance based on local needs (as opposed to a "canned" or set solution);

   d) failure to make proper use of or the inability to generate momentum and enthusiasm; and

   e) difficulties understanding and employing group dynamics to research objectives.

In sum, most districts can profit from both training sessions and a planning process. However, not every district is at a stage to benefit from such involvement. Recognizing a need, developing expertise, generating administrative support and commitment appear to be the most critical elements.

Summary

Evaluating leadership training and district planning poses a number of methodological and procedural problems. Basic data, on one extreme, and statistical treatments, on the other, do not appear to provide the needed summative and evaluative information of the process and product with the Right to Read program in New York State. The ethnographic paradigm provided the needed information through interviews (retrospective and introspective) and observations (formal and informal).

At the regional level, pre and post-data were collected from participants and workshop leaders monitoring district planning status, planning needs and expected (observed) emphasis on workshop topics. The interviews and observations focused on the six-step planning process which constituted the workshop's content. At the district level, the working committees were interviewed about and observed in the planning process of measuring the adequacy of the reading program, planning problems and assets and components emphasized in planning.

The conclusions indicated that comprehensive planning can be accomplished and have a positive effect on district personnel and programs.

The main benefits observed from this program were the re-directing of resources and funds to problem areas and the improvement of staff enthusiasm and capabilities to achieve quality reading instruction. In general, the ethnographic analysis utilized in this study provided some of the needed information to re-direct state and district efforts. Such information would not have been available from simple basic surveys or purely statistical treatments of data.

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